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ABSTRACT

In a letter to her mother, herself a former English teacher, a teaching assistant details impressions of her first year in the Writing Program at the University of Massachusetts (Amherst). During a semester an instructor gets to know writing students individually in a way that pierces deeply through the veneer of stereotype. The class published seven writing anthologies, and in many of them students put their feelings right on the line. Jay, who likely had an undiagnosed learning disability, wrote about his frustrations with school, and about how he had to work five times as hard as the average student to get only half as far. Brian wrote about the discovery of his learning disability and the frustrations and relief of coming to know his own strengths and weaknesses. Laurie wrote about drug use in her family and alcohol abuse in school. After seeing other students "get published," Shawn finally finished his paper with its first-hand description of the outbreak of war in Belgrade. As the teacher got to know the flesh-and-blood students behind the "types," the whole class became better acquainted through group activities like peer editing, class discussions, and the published anthologies. Both for teacher and students, using portfolio grading (not having to evaluate every piece of writing as if it were finished) was liberating. By the end of the semester, both teacher and students had developed a better understanding of the act of writing and of themselves as writers. (SAM)

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A Letter to My Mother

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Dear Mom,

Roger is sleeping ... some football game or
another on the television acting as his lullaby,
the dog is tucked under his arm, also fast asleep,
the kids are taking in a movie with friends, and I sit
down to record some of my last impressions of my
first teaching experience at U-Mass before they
dissipate into memory vapors. I thought you might
like to read along ...

I wrote this letter to my mother after finishing my first
semester as a teaching assistant in the Writing Program at
the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. My mother is 75
years old, and was an English teacher herself, once upon a
time in a high school in Buffalo in an era when The Canon
was capitalized and unquestioned, and writing was taught
with a focus on the product. My mother is still interested
in the profession, but from a distance. There is the
metaphorical distance imposed by having been away from the
profession for quite a few decades, and the literal
geographic distance that separates us, as she is four states
away. But she likes to hear what I have to say about what I

do. She likes to read. She emanates pride in offspring. You might say she is a friendly audience.

As the semester entered its last few weeks, I had begun to feel the weight of failure on my shoulders: I was castigating myself for not having covered all the things I'd wanted to cover, and wondering if I couldn't have discovered certain problems earlier, and solved them better. Perhaps we all feel that way at times.

But then, the last day rolled around, and I had a lovely last class with my students. The ten-ton feeling of doom seemed to lift and leave me as if by magic. It wasn't relief that took its place, there was no "Thank God It's Over" feeling. Instead of failure, I felt a sense of accomplishment ... and I wasn't even sure why. I began thinking of trying to capture it on paper. But as I imagined writing it, I imagined my slipshoddy journal. I imagined my thoughts becoming fragments, as I hurried to get them down. I imagined the effort. Perhaps I was lazy.

Plato's warning also occurred to me -- that writing it down might "break the spell," so to speak. It's an entomologist's dilemma: netting butterflies and mounting them on boards and labelling them with Latin names produces beautifully precise objects of scientific interest ... but it does not capture the ineffable movement of the creature as it moves from flower to flower, or from larva to winged stage. Yet, still-life butterflies can serve to remind one

of the real thing. Letters, I've found, can have the same effect:

(Dear Mom,)

I brought doughnuts and orange juice ... It occurred to me (given my bent for Jungian universals and cultural rituals) that the doughnuts and orange juice were, in essence, "communion" -- the breaking of bread and the drinking of ... well, the nectar of fruit, anyway. As the class straggled in, I set up the food and drinks, passed back papers and collected writing portfolios ...

Being a good Catholic, my mother understood the reference to "communion", but I had to stop and explain what writing portfolios were, and what they were doing in my classroom. Being a life-long art-student, my mother understood the analogy between art and writing portfolios. I had just used the portfolio method of grading for the first time, and weaning myself and my students away from a product-based, grade-dependent system had been like learning to walk again, unassisted. It was, ultimately, a liberating feeling for us all, I think, not to have to evaluate every piece of writing as if it was finished.

"The agenda for the day," I wrote, "besides turning in portfolios, was simply to go around the circle and read something, or tell something." Here, I had to stop and explain the "new" classroom custom of sitting in circles, workshop fashion, and why we all kept journals as part of the writing process. This, in turn, explained why many - including me - read from their journals that day.

One student read a short poem from his journal in which he unabashedly celebrated the apparently satisfying sexual

life he currently seemed to be enjoying. One of the several "quiet young females" in the class read her last entry, written the night before, a sentimental look back at her first semester at college. The piece I selected had been written at the first of the semester after I had given students a writing prompt which forced them to think about themselves as writers:

9/10/91 - Had my second class today and things went pretty darn well. Did some freewriting on the topic of "Me as a Writer." Used prompts to get the gears rolling: early memories of writing; proud moments; what's hard/what's easy; what I hate/what like...

Asked everyone to introduce themselves and share something they'd written. Some of the responses were:

- problem of procrastination
- fear of sharing writing/hate to read out loud
- don't like the grammar part
- problem of what to say in the first paragraph
- problem of how to get all this stuff in my head onto the paper
- prefer to start right out on a word processor; get hung up when I have to actually write with a pen on paper
- I like writing because I can say what I want about how I feel; the teacher can't tell me what to say

"I hoped that my journal reading would help to remind them," I wrote to my mother, "how far they had come in the past semester." In my letter to her, I went around the circle in my mind's eye, following the sequence of readings and announcements and banter that still echoed in my ear. I tried to describe the students - their growth, their unique personalities, their strengths and problems, their successes ... and my seeming failures. I went on for two days and fifteen pages. I even did several drafts, just as if I was in a writing class myself.

As I try to synopsise that portion of the letter into a "Reader's Digest" version, the vision begins to metastisize; the students begin to sound like a series of stereotypes. There was Brian, the student with a diagnosed learning disability; and Jay, a student with an undiagnosed, but likely, learning disability. There was Jiwoong, the Korean student, who wrote on one theme the whole semester -- how to manage one's time -- but didn't even realize it until the end of the semester because he had tried out such a variety of styles and perspectives while working on that same theme, and at the same time trying to become more comfortable with the English language. There was Beth, the Jewish female comedienne-aspirant who, for that final day's contribution, read the current Dining Commons menu; and Lou, the African-American football player, who revealed himself, in his writings, to be from a tough urban American neighborhood. Lou's papers always had some well-controlled dramatic element to them, but like Jiwoong, Lou struggled with English sometimes as if it was his second language.

And there was Shawn, the American-born astrophysics major who had grown up in Yugoslavia, who had spent the previous summer watching civil war break out in Belgrad and saw friends killed there, who wrote almost every paper on some aspect of astronomy or the space program, who was working on a science fiction book in his spare time, but who missed one-fourth of his classes and half of the deadlines for final drafts.

As I think of the class as a whole, I first see a group of "quiet young females" huddled together on the left, a group of "amiable guys" clustered in the center, and a group of "eclectic souls" on the right. And it's just as I feared: they seem trapped like species of butterflies, caught in mid-flight, labelled in Latin, "typed."

And then I remember the two notes I got at mid-term when I asked for anonymous feedback about what was going well and what wasn't. "Mix us up," they said. One student wrote about wanting to try out different peer editors, but was afraid of offending the group he'd fallen into the habit of working with. Another, obviously female, asked if there were any "interviewing exercises" planned. "If so," she wrote, "could you match up males and females in pairs?" I did facilitate a little "mixing it up" after that, and as I re-read the letter to my mother, I can see that on that last day some of the "amiable guys" had moved onto the "eclectic souls" turf, and some of the "eclectic souls" were mingling with the "quiet girls," as well as the "quiet guys," who had not even appeared in my first mental configuration.

Four months, a semester, is a fleeting period of time, but in that time one gets to know individual students -- especially in a writing class -- in a way that pierces deeply through the veneer of stereotype. Their papers are often highly personal, frequently painful to read.

(Dear Mom,)

Next was Brian, one of my 'star' pupils. During the second week of the semester, Brian had informed me that he had a learning disability -- he read slowly and

therefore had difficulty with timed testing situations, something he didn't have to deal with in this particular class. Brian's first few essays were rather unremarkable, but he tried hard. And then for his "issue of concern" paper, he wrote about homosexuality -- the deplorable attitudes of many on campus; the fact that his best friend from high school had confided, in their senior year, that he was a homosexual. He wrote of his own rejection, and then acceptance, of his friend's homosexuality; and then, of his friend's suicide the past summer.

Brian had been reluctant to publish his paper because he was afraid that others -- people not in the class, but from his hometown who had also come to this campus -- would read it; the news of his friend's homosexuality had never officially become "public property" in his hometown. Still, he wanted everyone in the class to hear the story. I gave him options: print it, don't print it, use a pseudonym, read it to the class. In the end, he decided to publish it in the class anthology, using only his first name. The rest of the class was deeply affected by this paper.

"Publish or perish" -- we think of that motto as pertaining only to the academy, but it filters down into the writing class as well, I explained to my mother. We published seven writing anthologies that semester, and in many of them students put their feelings right on the line. Jay wrote about his frustrations with school, and how it seemed as if he had to work five times as hard as the average student to get only half as far. His paper precipitated one by Brian, who wrote about the discovery of his learning disability, the frustrations and then the relief of coming to know his own strengths and weaknesses. Laurie wrote about drug use in her family and alcohol abuse in school. Shawn, after seeing the other students' work appear in the first two anthologies, became determined to "get published" and finally finished the paper he had

started the very first day of class, a paper that described what it had been like to witness the outbreak of war in Belgrade.

Others took the opportunity to get their opinions across in a more indirect manner. Jenny expressed a feminist point of view by writing about the roles of women in many American Indian cultures, and how liberated they seemed in comparison to traditional Eurocentric American culture; in another paper she assumed the voice of a mother cow as part of a discussion about the barbarities of veal production. Others saw writing and research assignments as opportunities to delve into their own interests and passions: in one paper, Karl wrote about Indian motorcycles (a no longer manufactured brand) and in another, what it was like to get up and go out with the crew team on the river as the sun was coming up. Jiwoong continued to write about time, and Shawn continued to write about life on other planets.

I also got to know students better in conference, which happened three times that semester. It was in a conference at the end of the semester that I learned - finally - why Lou never spoke in class discussions. The rest of the class could hardly wait to see what Lou had contributed to the latest anthology, so dramatic was his style. "You're in," began his first published piece, entitled "The Locker Room":

The doors are now shut. There's no turning back. Today's the day. The climate is dry and you see a slight mist forming. The air smells like the fabric softener downy, nice and fresh, just like new.

Everything is clean and neatly matched. The carpet is vacuumed to every nook and cranny. Players begin to come in one by one. The twitch in their eyes makes them intimidating. Each has that glare of fire and the look of death on their faces. No words are said, but occasionally someone may whisper ...

This piece went on to convey the mood in the locker room both before and after a losing game. Other pieces went on to explore life in prison; life on the streets; drinking and driving and the related death of a classmate; the hypocrisy of public attitude towards Black gangs when compared with the popular romanticized image of Italian mafioso. In writing, Lou seemed never to hold back, but having to vocalize his thoughts in the classroom seemed anathema to him. His explanation for this, in conference, was: he didn't want to appear to be a "clown," the term he used to describe another student who frequently monopolized class discussions.

Even as I got to know the flesh-and-blood students behind the "types," through their essays and the process notes that accompanied them, and in these conferences, we all got to know one another through our group activities -- peer editing, class discussions, and the published anthologies. We got to know who was sensitive about their writing, who was eager to share it, which ones were great sentence-level editors, which ones knew how to make good recommendations about style. There seemed to be a group sensibility that developed that sanctioned Shawn's absences, possibly because he seemed to be from another planet; he had had been an eyewitness to war, unlike any of the others.

That same group sensibility seemed to censor Chuck, "the clown" who monopolized conversations when he was there, and who attributed his frequent absences to having more important things to do. When these two group members arrived late, as usual, to the last class, other students competed with each other to be the one to provide Shawn with doughnuts and orange juice. He looked like he'd been up all night. Chuck, on the other hand, was challenged about his lateness. Catcalls were the response to his reading. He ignored them all -- as usual.

There was one other genre of activity that seemed to work well to get the juices flowing, provide a reason to write, and forge more group identity ... and that was "letters." The first letter that students wrote was in the form of sharing their thoughts with me about what writing meant to them. The next letter writing activity was an in-class writing exercise which seemed to be highly useful in learning a lesson about voice. As I wrote in my journal:

9/27/91 - I instructed the students to think of a topic, a very narrow topic such as "food on campus" or "roommate" or some other aspect of campus life, and to start writing a letter about that topic to a friend back home, someone they used to hang out with.

Then I asked them to write about the same exact subject to their parent(s)/guardian, the person who raised them.

Lastly, I asked them to write again on the same topic to Chancellor O'Brien.

It was really funny because as soon as I got to the "write to your parents" step, one of the students said, "Oh, I can see where you're going with this."

The exercise was conceptually effective. I spent a little time drawing out a few words that they used in the Chancellor's letter that they would never use in a friend's or parent's letter ("in regard to," "inebriated," "nutritive elements," etc.).

After the third anthology was published, I asked students to write a letter to the person whose essay preceded theirs, and another letter to a writer of their choice, making comments about the content or style of the piece, or how it compared to other essays the student had written. In my journal I noted:

Students who were afraid they had been 'too controversial' were the ones who were singled out for congratulations by the others for the stance they had taken; Josephine, who was afraid that 'the guys' wouldn't be able to identify with her topic (what people say to each other when they are breaking up -- and what they're really thinking) Josephine was surprised to receive as many letters from 'the guys' as 'the girls'."

Josephine, until this point in the semester, had maintained a rather sullen attitude. In her process notes, she had described her own papers as being "boring." Her papers were short and undeveloped; she told me that "there's nothing else to say -- everyone knows what I'm talking about." But something happened with this paper about "people breaking up." She pushed some buttons; she connected with an audience, one she had been certain would not know what she was talking about. The effect on her writing, as well as her attitude, was dramatic. Each subsequent paper was an improvement in effort over the last.

The last class letter-writing exercise was a letter to the editor, a tried-and true form of putting what one has learned about persuasive writing, audience, and voice to work. Ironically, I wrote to my mother, this assignment came due on the very day that some "Town Resident's" letter

appeared in the school newspaper, berating students in a rather irrational manner for writing their "silly opinions" to the school paper when "they should be doing their homework."

My students were doing their homework. We read the Town Resident's letter in class and analyzed every rhetorical flaw. Immediately, Brian discarded his original letter-to-the-editor and wrote a new one, addressing the "Town Resident" and his prejudices. He got 17 other students to co-sign his letter, and it appeared in the newspaper the next day.

The final assignment was an essay -- another self-assessment of themselves as writers. But the essay wasn't going to appear in a class publication; there were no specific peer editing duties assigned; it was for my eyes only. By the end of the semester, I had begun to sense that writing that wasn't going to be publicly shared, or expressly kept private (as in journal writing), was more like a letter, a two-way communique between the student and myself. It's difficult to have a sense of "audience" when the only person who is going to read the paper is the teacher, an "audience" of one.

Lou wrote at the end of the semester, as he had at the beginning, that he "loved" to write, but he hated English. He defined English, and the problems he had with it, as "grammatics," a kind of synthesis of grammar and syntax and mechanics, the "King's English," standardarized language,

academic discourse. But he "loved" to write, as he wrote to me:

When I write I like to be creative, original and to express myself freely. I write what ever comes to mind, and generally have a grip on new ideas. Before the actual process of writing, I usually take a minimum of 15 minutes to think about the layout, as though I were an architect. My first thought once a topic is chosen is to think of a good opening line which is catching ... I also like to have a good opening paragraph which lets the reader have an idea on what the paper will be about, but it won't give it away..

Few students developed Lou's clear-sighted self-awareness about their writing processes and "grammatics" problems, but many wrote with pride about papers they had written, or with hindsight about how certain papers could have been improved with revision. Many wrote about specific techniques they had learned or improved upon over the semester. And a few took the opportunity to use the persuasive skills they'd developed to try to make a case to explain their lack of performance during the semester. I had hoped that Jay would do this.

(Dear Mom,)

Jay was the one who likely had a learning disability. His writing, throughout the semester, had been a case of stunted growth. Nothing was developed very far. Many papers had been late, and several had still not been turned in by the last class. He had continuously worn an expression on his face that seemed to say, "It was due today?" He just couldn't seem to get with it. On this last day, it seemed that his biggest worry was that his grade might be lowered because of his four absences from class.

When it came his turn, he said, "Well I don't have anything to read... but I'd just like to ask something. How come our grade is lowered just because we miss some classes. I mean, if we pay our tuition, who cares if we show up or not?"

Actually, I was thrilled that he was trying to "challenge" me. It was the first indication I'd had all semester that he cared anything at all about his his own progress.

We spent a few minutes discussing the Writing Program's grading policies and the reasons behind them, and then I invited Jay to write a note persuading me to bend the rules in his case. Jay never followed through. He failed to get tested for learning disabilities. He failed to turn in his outstanding assignments. He failed to show up for his final conference. He failed to persuade me that I would be justified in giving him any other grade than an "F" for the course. Still, it was hard not to feel that I somehow deserved the same grade. His failure reminded me of my own - the points that I had forgotten to make, the motivation I had failed to provide for some, and my inexperience in recognizing certain problems. Jay was the reminder of all those "stuck points" as I went around the circle in my mind's eye; reminding me that one of the "quiet females" didn't even show up, most likely embarrassed that I'd questioned the authorship of her research paper, one which "sounded" as if someone else had written it; reminding me that Laurie, who had a savvy, street-wise voice in writing that rivaled Lou's, passed on the opportunity - just as Lou did - to share something orally with the class.

However, unlike Jay, Shawn finally completed all the assignments, made it to his last conference (late again, of course) and seized the opportunity to prepare a written

defense for his seeming inability to manage his work and time:

My absences are, I think, the result of me being a student of physics, which requires a certain attitude and view towards the world. Most of my friends think of me as being "out for lunch" or the other one is that I am in "geosynchronous orbit," never on the ground, always in the world of science, the world of physics and astronomy. My personal time does not correspond with usual time. I don't always wake up in the morning and sleep during the nights, and this is that way not due to parties or drinking, because I rarely drink, but due to the fact that every time there is a clear sky I go to the observatories to look at the stars.

I'll leave you there, looking at the stars, wondering - perhaps - how a teacher arrives at a grade for such a student.

(Dear Mom,)

We were done. We had come full circle. As we were all getting up, getting ready to go, for some reason I pointed out (perhaps it is my instinct to always want to ground experience in history) that if we had been holding this class 150 years ago, I would have been lecturing to them -- and lecturing to them in Latin, the language of education.

As a 'comeback,' one of my students attempted to make a joke. 'If this was 150 years ago, you wouldn't be here.' (He was referring to the absoluteness of time.) But Brian pointed out: 'if this was 150 years ago, you wouldn't be allowed to teach because you're a woman.'

What Latin label would be affixed to me, I wonder, if I was caught in mid-flight and pinned, wings spread, to a board?

I was afraid to put this down in writing, I think, because I was afraid that my feelings about that class would fade and fray like a trapped moth, or worse (perhaps) soar into eternity like some mythical butterfly. And yet I was

afraid that my memory might become just as moth-eaten if I didn't somehow try to capture it, or part of it. Like my students, I found an incentive to write when I found a friendly audience to write to, and a familiar format, a letter, in which to capture those raw thoughts. What I have as a result are not frozen butterflies with Latin labels, but a piece of text that helps me remember how it was -- how I was, how my class was, how we came together at a certain place and time. It's too easy to forget what it was really like.

Mom,
I miss you as always. Maybe this will help bring back some memories of your own teaching days. Take care.

Love,